

THE SLAVE WOMAN.

The sun rages in the sky, radiating sweltering heat from overhead, and bakes the arid and barren landscape. The only respite comes from the stale but cooler wind that whirls by in steady intervals and I sit in the shadow of the mast and wipe off the beads of sweat rolling down my forehead. Dust assaults my lungs and I feel like I'm choking in a furnace. The air lacks moisture and the tang of salt on the breeze adds to my thirst.

Calkodia is a hostile kingdom where only extreme climates dominate. They fight for control like war lords. This coast is under the influence of Calorico – the desert god – but it used to be reigned by Humidus – the rainforest god – and lush vegetation and serpentine rivers cloaked the terrain. And it will change again. Nothing stays unchanged for long in Calkodia.

"Ah good, it appears we are prepared to set sail," calls a voice from the dock. I squint at the vague figures distorted by the rising air. As they approach their shimmering silhouettes grow more defined. It's Grendos and an army of men carrying furniture and possessions from the Villa. A family has decided to move to a more welcoming location across the sea. "I wouldn't blame them," I mutter under my breath.

"Welcome aboard my good friend," Captain Perdraxus bellows as he emerges from below deck to greet them. Without delay, the men begin stocking the holds with cargo while the captain and Grendos enjoy refreshments inside. Then I see her. A girl, no, a woman, bound in chains being forcefully shoved aboard. She looks rough and famished. Her skin is smeared with dirt and her hair is tangled and matted. She's a Dragus Tamarus – the tribe was enslaved by the king's legions centuries ago – and most households own at least one nowadays.

The woman stumbles and trips on the deck. One of the men marches over to where she lies exhausted and delirious.

"Get up! He yells down at her. "I said get up you idiot!" She looks up terrified, tears streaming down her cheek. He takes hold of her hair and starts dragging her and she screams in agony.

"Stop that!" I bark, surprised at the anger in my voice. The man stops and the whole crew fall silent. "Who gives you the right to give me orders," he snarls back.

"I do," Perdraxus makes his presence known. His voice echoes off the distant cliffs. "And if you think for one minute that I won't leave you to shrivel like a date here in this desert, I'll show you personally, what happened to the last man who spoke to my crew in that manner..." The man remains motionless.

"I'll wager you wouldn't live to see the sun rise again," Captain continues. He gives a subtle wink in my direction. Afterwards he orders us to cast off, now that all the cargo is on board. We set sail towards the darkening horizon as the first stars become visible.

That night, Corgis – the oldest and most superstitious of the crew – argues with the captain about the slave woman he saw earlier.

“She’s a Dragus Tamarus...tamers of the Shadow Dragons! Forbidden from ever setting a foot on a ship, prevented by the legions from reuniting with the seawater from where they once came...you know the story Perdraxus”.

“No, I know the myth. And that’s all it is...a myth. Goodnight Corgis.”

“You have to kill her now while...”

“I said goodnight!” Perdraxus shuts the door in Corgis’ face and he storms off muttering under his breath.

It’s a clear day once again but the sun has lost its intensity and the breeze is fresh and cool. I know we are escaping the clutches of Calorico and entering Borealen – god of the cold lands - where construction of the new villa is near completion. All seems pleasant, and while the majority of the men onboard are finishing up breakfast, I carry half of mine to the Brig where the slave woman is held. I peer into the darkness below the rusted grate. “Hello?” I ask quietly, trying to avoid detection by the crew. Her face materialises in a narrow shaft of light and she squints up at me. “I brought you some food, you must be starving”, I lower the plate.

She hesitates at first, but gives in to her aching stomach. The food is gone in an instant and I can’t help but feel annoyed with myself for bringing such a meagre portion.

“Why are you so kind to me?” she asks, perplexed. Suddenly, I hear the panicked shouts of men behind and a deafening hiss that pulsates through the water, reverberating through the whole ship. I run to the guardrails. In the distance the water trembles before bursting from the sea and a deathly evil serpent manifests itself in the monstrous mass. A Shadow Dragon. There have been few reports of an attack in recent times but here it is, scrutinising the ship through glassy slits. A chorus of gunfire breaks the silence and bullets bombard the beast like a shower of raindrops.

But the futile attempt to kill it only aggravates the dragon and it blows a wintry looking plume of mist into the sky.

“Aquamite!” Corgis’ voice trembles in horror - “Take Cover!” The men drop behind barrels, storage compartments and the masts as the shards of aquamite shoot down like arrows glinting in the sun. Once they reach the hull, they tear through it effortlessly. The shrapnel and splinters strike down dozens of men. I crouch with a group behind a raised metal latch where aquamite forms huge indentations as it ricochets off the metal. A man that came with Grendos gazes in bewilderment at a fragment of aquamite resting at his foot.

“It’s Dragon Glass, formed from water that has been breathed on by a Shadow Dragon. It’s the hardest and sharpest substance in the world and absolutely lethal. This is why these creatures are so dangerous!” I yell to overcome the pelting racket.

There's a brief respite in the onslaught of the dragon as he breathes another misty plume and I remember the slave woman. I make a run for the brig. Fumbling to unlock it I already hear the whirling sound of an inbound attack. I pull her out but it occurs to me that I've left it too late to reach safety and the aquamite is raining down again.

Suddenly, a wall of water rolls up beyond the ship and surges towards the dragon. The beast is tackled into the depths. I turn to the slave woman but her stance seems odd. Throughout this turmoil and mayhem, she has been staring intently at the rising water. Her hand rises in perfect harmony with it and her brows are furrowed in deep concentration. Another wave rises into the air and crashes down, hindering the efforts of the dragon to free himself. I come to the realisation that she is controlling this phenomenon.

"But you...you're...a dragon tamer," I stammer. "Ha, we are not *Dragus Tamarus* - tamers of beasts," she sneers. "Our language is beyond all you comprehend. We are the *Drag u sta marus*." Her voice is changing and it ripples, surges in and out. Listening, I hear the softness of a ripple in a rockpool, the crushing weight of wave on rock, the last breath of a drowning sailor. Her voice is the voice of the sea. The dragon is now lifeless, where once it was deadly and sinuous it is now an ungainly corpse bobbing in the water.

I smile at the slave woman but the smile dies on my lips. Her eyes flash with anger and her hair whips round her face. Once again a liquid wall rises, enveloping the ship, sealing our watery tomb. *Drag u sta marus* – I hear the words. Did they come from her cruel mouth or the crest of the wave that plummets upon us?